

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Resilient Networks*, PS Docket No. 21-346; *Amendments to Part 4 of the Commission's Rules Concerning Disruptions to Communications*, PS Docket No. 15-80; *New Part 4 of the Commission's Rules Concerning Disruptions to Communications*, ET Docket No. 04-35 (September 30, 2021)

Preparing our communications networks to withstand disasters and emergencies has never been more important. Challenges caused by climate change—everything from record high and low temperatures to storms of greater ferocity and scope—are coming into sharper focus. Now is the time for action, and robust, modern communications networks must be part of our national strategy. I'm particularly excited about innovative uses of 5G, like smart meters for energy management, that can help us reduce our country's reliance on fossil fuels and better manage our energy resources.

But those solutions—and all the benefits of broadband—are only as valuable as they are reliable. I am pleased to support today's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking because it represents a critical step toward keeping Americans connected during emergencies and speeding the restoration of networks when the danger has passed. This is a comprehensive and wide-ranging inquiry, so today I will highlight just a few of the NPRM's important features.

First, this NPRM is an important part of the Commission's work to advance digital equity and inclusion. We should all know by now that the digital divide does not affect all communities in the same way. In particular, Americans of color remain, by a wide margin, less likely to have a home broadband connection than their counterparts: 29 percent of Black adults and 35 percent of Latinx adults do not have a home broadband connection. We also know that extreme weather, natural disasters, and power outages are particularly devastating for communities of color.¹ As Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee and I recently discussed during the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Virtual Annual Legislative Conference, we saw this terrible dynamic play out in the devastating impact that Winter Storm Uri had throughout the nation, and particularly in central Houston. We will not have equal access to modern communications without improving network resiliency and reliability.

Second, this NPRM seeks comment on whether we should make carrier participation in the Disaster Information Recovery System mandatory, something I have long called on the Commission to actively consider. During a disaster, DIRS provides a wealth of actionable information that can shape the local, state, and federal response. Today, we don't always know if a carrier is not reporting because it has chosen not to or because it has sustained damage that makes the company unable to report. With expanded participation, DIRS reports will be even more valuable. I look forward to robust comments on the costs and benefits of making participation mandatory, and whether there are other ways the Commission could expand participation.

Third, this NPRM brings much-needed attention to issues around backup power. In early 2020, I visited Puerto Rico to learn more about the steps taken to improve network resiliency after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, how communications networks and recovery efforts performed during the recent earthquakes, and what additional actions are needed to ensure that communications networks are always available. As I met with providers, regulators, and everyday Puerto Ricans, a theme emerged:

¹ Press Release, EPA, *EPA Report Shows Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change on Socially Vulnerable Populations in the United States* (Sept. 2, 2021), <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-report-shows-disproportionate-impacts-climate-change-socially-vulnerable>; Leiserowitz & Akerlof, *Yale Project on Climate Change, Race, Ethnicity and Public Responses to Climate Change* (2010), <http://environment.yale.edu/uploads/RaceEthnicity2010.pdf>.

communications services are only as good as their access to power. This is a recurring scenario. During the 2020 earthquakes in Puerto Rico, the overwhelming majority of cell-site outages resulted from power loss, not damage to facilities. The same was true this year after Hurricane Ida. I am glad the NPRM asks detailed questions about how backup power can be deployed to reduce the frequency of power-related service disruptions.

These issues, and many others raised in the NPRM, are urgent and important. Now is the time for the FCC to update our rules for this era of climate-based events. I thank the staff of the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau for their hard work on this item and the many investigations that preceded it.